

NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES
COMMITTEE ON INTERNATIONAL SECURITY AND ARMS CONTROL
2101 Constitution Avenue Washington, D.C. 20418

October 10, 1996

Professor Vladimir E. Fortov
Deputy Prime Minister
and Chairman, State Committee of the Russian Federation
for Science and Technologies
11 Tverskaya Street
103905 Moscow, Russia

Dear Mr. Deputy Prime Minister:

The purpose of this letter is to introduce you to a project of our National Academy of Sciences (NAS) and Institute of Medicine (IOM) that we believe is unusually important. It would require the collaboration of Russian scientists and we are authorized to finance their participation by means of appropriations provided through the Nunn-Lugar legislation.

The intent of the project is to design a bilateral initiative that the United States and Russia might jointly undertake to monitor especially dangerous biological pathogens: those that would have the most destructive potential if developed as military weapons or as instruments of terrorism. We believe there is a relatively small number of such agents that ultimately will require special rules of handling if their inherent danger is to be effectively contained. Although that would eventually have to be done for the entire world, we believe there are solid reasons for beginning on a bilateral basis. Much of the relevant scientific expertise resides in our two countries, and we are burdened with a legacy of suspicion acquired during the Cold War period. Until that legacy is overcome and reliable collaboration is achieved between Russia and the United States, it seems unlikely that a more general arrangement could be established.

There appear to be very strong incentives to pursue this idea in practical detail. Apart from the direct danger of the pathogens in question, the unresolved suspicion is clearly interfering with efforts to develop constructive security relations, and is probably also retarding potentially productive collaboration in the relevant fields of science. We believe there is an opportunity to clear away these barriers and to make an important contribution to the state of public health. We believe that both countries would benefit very substantially.

The project is being developed by a committee of the Working Group on Biological Weapons Control of the NAS Committee on International Security and Arms Control, in collaboration with the IOM Board on International Health. A draft list of committee members is attached. We realize, however, that full Russian participation is vital from the very outset, and we are committed to working that out before we proceed any further. Accordingly, we hope to form a liaison group of Russian scientists who can work very closely with our committee at all phases of the project, and we would very much appreciate your advice and counsel in suggesting whom we should work with toward this end. We propose then to send a small group of committee members and other scientists to Russia in about six weeks to begin discussions of the project plan with liaison members and other key Russian scientists identified by the project team.

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We hope to initiate the larger project by establishing two collaborative research projects, one with colleagues at NPO Vector in Koltsovo and the other with the State Research Center for Applied Microbiology in Obolensk. We have identified specific topics that we believe would demonstrate the scientific importance of collaboration between the United States and Russia, and we are prepared to provide financing for these efforts through the International Science and Technology Center. In addition, we would like to engage these colleagues and others in the process of designing an institutional arrangement that would provide for sustained monitoring, scientific collaboration, and public health management for the especially dangerous disease categories.

This arrangement—in addition to creating new, transparent patterns of operations for research on especially dangerous biological pathogens—could provide a means for linking Russian scientists to growing international efforts to solve global public health problems. These new efforts—which include, for example, early-stage discussions among countries about the possible creation of a global monitoring and surveillance network for potentially dangerous diseases—would benefit enormously from the expertise and involvement of Russian scientists. Public health programs in Russia would also gain from global advances in the struggle against disease and disability. We hope that this new arrangement will eventually also include needed expertise from all the institutes that were engaged in significant BW research.

We have had some initial conversations about the general idea for the project with Academician Lev Sandakhchiev, the director of NPO Vector, and we believe he is interested. Our contacts with colleagues at Obolensk have been more limited up to this point, and we hope to send a delegation there to consult with them in more detail.

We hope that there might be an early occasion for meeting with you as well. Roald Sagdeev, who is a member of our committee, and an important collaborator for this project, has encouraged us particularly strongly to talk with you and we very much hope to be able to do so. We will be in touch shortly to try to arrange an appointment.

Sincerely,

Joshua Lederberg
Rockefeller University
Chairman

John Steinbruner
The Brookings Institution
Vice-chairman